Amendments to the Claims

1. (Currently Amended). A system for controlling access to a vehicle, the system comprising:

a vehicle-associated access control module for enabling access to the vehicle by a first authorized user following completion of a verification sequence,

a remote verification module for enabling completion of the verification sequence through communications with the vehicle-associated access control module, and

a communications channel for supporting communications between the vehicle-associated access control module and the remote verification module,

the vehicle-associated access control module also includes means for determining whether communications are being passed between the vehicle-associated access control module and the remote verification module and for enabling access to the vehicle in the absence of communications between the vehicle-associated access control module and the remote verification module.

2. (Original). The system of claim 1 wherein the communications channel includes the Internet.

3. (Currently Amended). The system of claim 1 ~~2~~ wherein the communications channel includes wireless communications elements.

4. (Currently Amended). The system of claim 1 ~~3~~ wherein the remote verification module includes a server that stores personal identification information representative of the first authorized user.

5. (Original). The system of claim 4 wherein the server includes elements for enabling the first user to reserve, in advance, a predetermined period of access to the vehicle.

6. (Currently Amended). The system of claim 4 ~~5~~ wherein the server includes elements for verifying, in real-time, a personal identifier provided by the first authorized user as a prerequisite to completion of the verification sequence.

7. (Original). The system of claim 6 wherein the personal identifier includes a personal identification number.

8. (Original). The system of claim 6 wherein the personal identifier includes a personal identification object.

9. (Original). The system of claim 8 wherein the personal identification object is an electronic device containing a unique code representative of the first authorized user.

10. (Currently Amended). The system of claim 9 wherein

the electronic device is a chip card or tag, and

the vehicle-associated ~~processor~~ access control module is in communication with a chip card detector that enables access to the vehicle only when a validated chip card is placed in proximity to the card detector.

11. (Currently Amended). The system of claim 1 ~~10~~ wherein the vehicle-associated access control module ~~processor~~ includes associated audio/visual display elements.

12. (Original). The system of claim 11 wherein the audio/visual display elements include a visual display and a speaker.

13. (Currently Amended). The system of claim 1 ~~12~~ wherein the vehicle-associated access control module ~~processor~~ includes data entry elements for use by the user to enter data.

14. (Original). The system of claim 13 wherein the data entry elements include a keyboard.

15. (Original). The system of claim 13 wherein the data entry elements include a touch-screen.

16. (Original). The system of claim 13 wherein the data entry elements can be used to enter a user-associated personal identification number to identify the user.

17. (Currently Amended). The system of claim 16 wherein the vehicle-associated access control module processor includes a user interface processor for processing information-representative signals from the data entry elements and to the display.

18. (Currently Amended). The system of claim 1 ~~17~~ wherein the vehicle-associated access control module ~~processor~~ is in communication with an ignition disabling module for preventing actuation of vehicle ignition unless the verification sequence is successfully completed.

19. (Currently Amended). The system of claim 1 ~~18~~ wherein the vehicle-associated access control module ~~processor~~ is in communication with door lock actuator elements, for unlocking the vehicle door locks after the verification sequence is successfully completed.

20. (Currently Amended). The system of claim 1 ~~19~~ wherein the vehicle-associated access control module ~~processor~~ includes a wireless modem.

21. (Cancelled).

22. (Cancelled).

23. (Cancelled).

24. (Currently Amended). The system of claim 4 ~~21~~ wherein the server is capable of communication with each of a plurality of vehicles in a fleet of vehicles.

25. (Original). The system of claim 24 wherein

reservations can be accepted from a plurality of authorized users for a single vehicle or each of a plurality of vehicles in a fleet of vehicles, and

the reservations include selected pickup and drop-off times and locations.

26. (Currently Amended). The system of claim 1 ~~25~~ wherein the system further comprises means to prevent ~~prevents other~~ authorized users other than a ~~the~~ first authorized user from obtaining access to the ~~first~~ vehicle during a reservation time.

27. (Currently Amended). The system of claim 1 ~~26~~ wherein the system further comprises means to ~~accepts~~ accepts and ~~registers~~ registers newly added vehicles and vehicle-associated access control modules.

28. (Currently Amended). The system of claim 1 ~~27~~ wherein the vehicle-associated access control module can monitor total access time and distance covered.

29. (Original). The system of claim 28 wherein total access time is measured from vehicle pickup time to drop-off time.

30. (Currently Amended). The system of claim 28 ~~29~~ wherein distance covered is measured from vehicle pickup to drop-off.

31. (Currently Amended). The system of claim 4 ~~27~~ wherein the communications channel includes a program for communication between the vehicle-associated access control module ~~processor~~ and the server and a database resident on the server.

32. (Currently Amended). The system of claim 31 wherein to vehicle-associated access control module ~~processor~~ is capable of communicating with the server via (1) the Internet, or (2) another communication network.

33. (Currently Amended). The system of claim 1 ~~5~~ wherein the vehicle-associated access control module ~~processor~~ includes elements for verifying, in real-time, a personal identifier provided by the first authorized user as a prerequisite to completion of the verification sequence.

34. (Currently Amended). A method of providing controlled access to a vehicle, the method comprising

accepting from a first authorized user a reservation of access to a first vehicle at a first time,

registering, in a database, a reservation information item representative of the identity of the first authorized user, identity of the first vehicle or pool of vehicles, and a value representative of the first time prescribed by the reservation,

subsequently accepting via a wireless communication, from a vehicle-associated processor, a request-to-access message indicating that a user is at the first vehicle or one of a pool of vehicles requesting access thereto,

responding to the request-to-access message by entering into a verification sequence, the verification sequence including (1) determining the identity of the user requesting access to the vehicle and (2) comparing, against information contained in the reservation information item in the database, the identity of the user requesting access to the vehicle, the identity of the vehicle, and the time of the request for access, and

if (1) the user requesting access is the first user, (2) the vehicle is the first vehicle or one of a pool of vehicles, and (3) the time of the request for access is the first time, then enabling the first user to access the vehicle.

35. (Currently Amended). A method of enabling controlled vehicle access by a first authorized user to a first vehicle within a fleet of vehicles, the method including the steps of

accepting an advance reservation by the first authorized user to reserve access to the first vehicle at a first authorized location beginning at a first authorized time,

verifying when the first authorized user reaches the first vehicle at the first authorized time, that the first authorized user has a valid reservation for access to the first vehicle at the first authorized time, said step of verifying includes

a) checking, using a ~~the~~ vehicle-associated access control processor, whether a communications channel to a ~~the~~ server containing a database of reservation information is available, and

b) if a communications channel to the server is available, verifying whether the customer identification is valid by comparing the customer information with information in the server's database; or

c) if a communications channel to the server is not available, verifying whether the customer identification is valid by comparing the customer information with information resident in the vehicle-associated access control processor, and

enabling the first authorized user, following successful completion of the verifying step, to gain access to and initiate operation of the first vehicle.

36. (Original). The method of claim 35 comprising the further steps of:

recognizing, when the first authorized user returns the first vehicle to either the first authorized location or a second authorized location, the return of the first vehicle, and

automatically billing an account of the first authorized user upon return of the first vehicle.

37. (Currently Amended). The method of claim 35 ~~36~~ wherein the step of accepting a reservation includes the step of verifying the identity of the user attempting to make a reservation.

38. (Currently Amended). The method of claim 35 ~~37~~ wherein the step of verifying the identity of the user attempting to make a reservation includes the step of verifying the status of the user's account.

39. (Currently Amended). The method of claim 35 ~~38~~ including the further step of notifying the user if a problem exists with the user's account.

40. (Currently Amended). The method of claim 35 ~~39~~ wherein the step of accepting a reservation includes the step of enabling the user to specify requested vehicle, requested pickup location, request vehicle access start date and time, and requested vehicle access end date and time.

41. (Currently Amended). The method of claim 35 ~~40~~ wherein the step of accepting a reservation includes the further step of verifying whether the requested vehicle is available at the requested pick up location at the requested start date and time.

42. (Currently Amended). The method of claim 35 ~~41~~ including the further step of presenting the user with alternate choices if the requested vehicle is not available at the requested pickup location at the requested vehicle access start date and time.

43. (Currently Amended). The method of claim 35 ~~42~~ including the further step of transmitting, upon acceptance of the reservation, information representative of the reservation to ~~a~~ the vehicle-associated access control processor.

44. (Currently Amended). The method of claim 35 ~~43~~ wherein the step of verifying that the user has a valid reservation for access to the vehicle includes the further steps of:

enabling the user to provide to the vehicle-associated access control processor information representative of the user's identity,

verifying, using the vehicle-associated access control processor, whether the user, identified by way of the information representative of the user's identity, has a reservation,

if the identified user has a reservation, verifying whether the identification provided by the user to the vehicle-associated access control processor is valid, and

if the customer identification is valid, authorizing the step of enabling the user to obtain access to the vehicle.

45. (Cancelled).

46. (Cancelled).

47. (Cancelled).

48. (Currently Amended). The method of claim 35 ~~47~~ wherein access is refused if the identified user does not have a reservation.

49. (Currently Amended). The method of claim 35 ~~47~~ wherein access is refused if the identified user's identification is not valid.

50. (Currently Amended). The method of claim 36 ~~49~~ wherein the step of recognizing return of the vehicle includes the further steps of:

notifying the server of vehicle return and transmitting, to the server, usage information representative of usage time and distance covered.

51. (Currently Amended). The method of claim 36 ~~50~~ further including the step of automatically billing a user after recognizing the return of the vehicle, wherein the step of automatically billing includes the further steps of:

receiving usage information,

calculating charges corresponding to usage time and distance covered, and

transmitting for payment the calculated charges.

52. (Currently Amended). A vehicle shared-use system comprising a plurality of vehicle-associated access control processors and a remote verification module, the system comprising:

means for enabling access to a vehicle by a first authorized user following completion of a verification sequence,

means for enabling completion of the verification sequence through communications with one of the vehicle-associated access control processors ~~module~~, and

means for communicating between the vehicle-associated access control processor ~~module~~ and the remote verification module, and~~.~~

means for determining whether communications are being passed between the vehicle-associated access control processor and the remote verification module.